

For our first date we met at the Montana Brewing Company. I recognized her the minute she walked through the door. She was tall and curvy, just like her profile picture. She was dressed conservatively in blue jeans and a cashmere sweater. I don't remember if I kissed her cheek or shook her hand. The conversation was mostly about work. Christie was an ER nurse with lots of interesting stories. My favorite was the housewife who wanted to hold a baby raccoon that she'd found in her garage. I work as a letter carrier; most of my stories were about getting bit by dogs.

We had one drink and then we decided to take a walk. It was late August, still fairly warm at night. We ended up at Walker's Grill, a swanky restaurant with tall windows and a romantic view of downtown Billings. They had an open kitchen so we could see the chefs cleaning up for the night. It was almost ten o'clock so there was plenty of room at the bar. Christie wanted to try their tomato daiquiri. I pretended not to notice the price. We talked about vacations we'd taken. We lied about past relationships. We reminisced about our college days. Christie had a son named Billy who was in junior high, and an ex-husband who worked for Verizon.

We were holding hands as we walked to Christie's car. At the stop light she dropped my hand and held onto my arm. I thought about asking her to come home with me, but I decided to play it safe. I wanted to see her again. I walked her to her car and kissed her goodnight.

It was after midnight when I got home. I was asleep two minutes after my head hit the pillow. I was awoken by someone tiptoeing into my bedroom. The room was dark. I listened quietly as she removed her clothes and climbed into bed with me.

"Grandma?" I asked, "Is that you?"

"Shut up. Where were you?" Natalie said. "Were you on a date?"

"Yes. And please don't break into my house while I'm sleeping."

"I didn't break in, you left the door unlocked."

"That doesn't mean you're an invited guest."

"Are you going to see her again?"

"I hope so."

"What's her name?"

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I just want to know her name.”

“Forget it.”

“Did you fuck her?” Natalie asked.

“Not yet, but I’m working on it.”

“Oh my god, you’re such a pig.”

“I know. That’s why we get along so well.”

“Are you in love with her?”

“I just met her tonight.”

“You know I’ll leave you if you fall in love with her. It’ll be goodbye forever and you’ll never see me again.”

“Promises, promises.”

Christie and I started seeing more of each other, but I wasn’t sure if it was anything more than a booty call. Sometimes she would come over for two hours and then run home to make dinner for her son. At least, that’s what she told me she was doing. One day she sent me a text that said: “Sure!! Lemme see if I can find a sitter for Billy.” I wasn’t sure what she was responding to since I hadn’t sent her a text. Then I realized the message was meant for someone else; she was probably going on a date. The following week I got a text from her that said, “I had fun tonight,” with a kissy face emoji. It was a little unsettling due to the fact that I’d been sitting home watching TV. The following day she told me she’d meant to send that message to her brother, Mark. I let it slide.

We continued dating. Even though we weren’t going to fall in love, we still had fun together. She introduced me to her brother, Mark and his boyfriend, Randall. We met for dinner at the Highlands Country Club where Mark was a member. He showed up wearing purple pants, which was something of a surprise since Mark is a meteorologist for KYET-8. I’m used to seeing him wear the conservative business attire he wears on TV. Christie told me her brother was part of a package deal. She was the younger sibling by eleven months. She rented a small house that was walking distance from Mark’s house. He seemed like a nice enough guy, but I wasn’t so sure about Randall. He looked a little shady,

like a man who lives in Las Vegas and earns his money playing poker. On his left hand was a small tattoo of flaming dice. Randall was drinking whiskey on ice and slurring his words by the time his corn chowder arrived. During dinner I kept wondering how I could turn this scene into a short story.

I was sitting at Shooters one night, having a beer, when Natalie walked in. She was the only woman in the bar besides the bartender. She sat down next to me and said, "I know who Christie is."

"How did you know her name? Please don't stalk her."

"I'm not. But I know who she is. Is her last name Jenkins?"

I had to think about it. "I don't know what her last name is."

"You don't know your girlfriend's last name?"

"She's not my girlfriend."

Natalie took out her phone and showed me a picture of Christie.

"Where did you get that picture?"

"Don't worry about it." She flipped to another picture on her phone. "Is that her ex-husband?"

"How should I know? I never met the guy. Please leave her out of this."

"I know who she is. She's a total slut."

I said something about the pot calling the kettle black. Natalie didn't like it. I said, "Why do you care? This doesn't concern you."

"Are you in love with her?"

"No. And she's not in love with me. We enjoy each other's company, that's it."

"How could you be with her when you know you could have me?"

"Isn't that a song?"

"If you fall in love with her, you'll never see me again. I'm not kidding. It'll be goodbye forever."

"If I had a nickel for every time I heard you say that—"

"I'm not kidding." The bartender stood in front of Natalie and waited. Natalie asked if I was going to buy her a drink.

"Depends," I said. "Are you coming home with me?"

“Of course.”

“What do you want?”

One day Christie had a few hours to kill before taking Billy to soccer practice, so we decided to have a drink at the Tap Inn. The Tap Inn is a dive bar on Broadwater. It was made famous in 2016 when a young couple making out at the bar failed to notice the three armed men who were robbing the place. The crowd on Tuesday afternoon was older. The drinks were cheap. The ambiance was lacking. I kept one eye on Christie and one eye on the door—just in case. I had a few dollars sitting on the bar and suggested we play some songs on the jukebox. “I can’t drink beer without listening to music,” I told her. “Beer and music go together. Like biscuits and gravy.”

Christie rolled her eyes. We got up and walked over to the jukebox. She said, “What are you going to play?”

“Let’s play some Bob Dylan. You like Bob Dylan?”

“Sure.”

Her tone of voice wasn’t convincing. “What’s your favorite Bob Dylan album?”

“Um,” she said laughing, “I like them all. What do you like?”

“You don’t like Bob Dylan. You’re an imposter, admit it! Who sent you?” I tickled her, as if I were trying to get a confession. She played a song I didn’t like. I said, “Did you listen to the Backstreet Boys when you were growing up? Because I will end this relationship right now—”

“Are we in a relationship?”

“Well, we’re having sex.”

“Do you want to be in a relationship?”

“Do you prefer acoustic Bob Dylan or electric Bob Dylan? I prefer electric, but that’s just me.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I know. You didn’t answer my question either. Did you know Bob Dylan was booed off stage when he went electric. I have to remind myself of that when my short stories get booed off stage. Even Bob Dylan has to face rejection once in a while.”

“You write short stories?”

“Yeah. I live in an alternate reality where people talk backwards and birds sing Italian love songs.”

“Sounds weird.”

“Oh, it is weird. It’s totally weird. Do you know who Kurt Vonnegut is?”

“Hmm, no.” She held my hand. “Can I read one of your stories?”

“Sure, if you want to.”

“Are they any good?”

“No, of course not.”

“They’re not?”

“Well, in an alternate reality they’re blockbusters, but here in this universe I’ve yet to be discovered.”

“Then why do you write, if your stories are no good?”

“Same reason why I take a shit every morning.”

“Oh my god. That’s gross.”

“Well, sometimes the truth is messy.”

Christie made a face. “What kinds of stories are they?”

“Dystopian musicals, mostly. Sometimes autobiographical fiction.” I squeezed her hand.

Feeling embolden by the alcohol I said, “Are you using me for a booty call? Is that what this is?”

“Oh my god. No. Why would you ask that?”

“Just wondering. Would you tell me if you were?”

“I’m not using you for a booty call.” She laughed. And then she kissed me.

Natalie continued to send me naked pictures of herself. The more I avoided her, the more desperate her behavior became. She sent me twenty-four text messages in one day. I responded to none of them. Natalie drove by my house late at night, checking to see whose car was in my driveway. She’d follow me to work. She’d follow me while I delivered mail. She was waiting for me in the parking lot the minute I got off work. “Why are you spending so much time with her?” Natalie asked.

“I’m not. I was delivering the mail.”

“Yesterday you took her to Pottery Barn!”

“She needed a new rug for her living room.”

“You never went shopping with me. You hate shopping.”

“How did you know we went to Pottery Barn?”

“You’re falling in love with her.”

“I am not falling in love with her.”

“Are you in love with me?”

“No. I told you that.”

“Do you think I’m pretty?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“We used to have so much fun together. Why don’t you love me?”

I shrugged my shoulders. What was I supposed to say?

“I want to go bowling,” said Natalie. “You never take me bowling anymore.”

“We’re not in a relationship.”

“Can’t you take me bowling?”

“I don’t want to see two women at the same time. I don’t like all this sneaking around.”

“Oh my god. Seriously, grow up.”

Sunday afternoon we went to Sunset Lanes. The bowling alley was crowded with little kids celebrating birthdays. The house lights were turned down and there was loud music playing. Kids high on ice cream and cake ran in circles, screaming nonsensically. Some of them still had chocolate on their faces. Parents were drinking from red plastic cups. Natalie and I were drinking Bloody Mary’s—even though I hate Bloody Mary’s. She was using a pink bowling ball that weighed six pounds. She had a strange delivery when she bowled. She called it her Ninja Move. She would run towards the foul line, release the ball, and finish with a slide that turned her sideways, both hands over her head like a ballerina. She threw one gutter ball after another.

I said, “I don’t think the Ninja Move is working today.”

“I’m not drunk enough. One more drink and then you’ll be in real trouble.”

“Or, I could talk to the manager and see about getting you some bumpers.”

I got up to get my bowling bowl. Natalie threw her arms around my neck and kissed me. I pulled away from her. “What’s wrong?” she snapped.

“Nothing.”

“Afraid someone might see you? How can you be in love with that fat slut?”

“Will you please shut the fuck up? I’ve been seeing her for less than two months.”

“Yeah, and already you’re in love with her—that fucking slut.”

“Stop being mean.” I walked around her. I stepped up to the foul line and threw a ball that avoided the gutter, but only knocked down two pins. I had a 87 going into the eighth frame. “I hate bowling.”

“I think you’re in love with her.”

“For the last time, I am not in love with her!”

“Do you love me?”

“No! I don’t love either one of you. I enjoy your company. That’s it.” I realized I had misspoken and felt the need to correct myself. “*Most of the time* I enjoy your company.”

“Who would you rather be with, me or her?”

“Oh my god.” I sat down and began untying my bowling shoes. “Her.”

“That’s it! We’re through. How can you say that? You would rather hangout with that fat slut?”

“Natalie, she’s not fat.”

“Ah-ha! So you admit that she’s a slut.”

“Listen to me. I like Christie. And Christie likes me. And the more time I spend with her—”

“Stop it!”

“I can’t help it.”

“We’re through. You hear me? We are through!”

“What do you mean we’re through? We’re not even in a relationship.”

“I’m not kidding. This is goodbye forever.”

“It’s probably for the best.”

“Yeah? You’re never going to see me again, so I hope you have fun with your fat whore!” The boys bowling in the lane next to us turned to look at Natalie. One boy put his hand over his mouth and giggled.

Last night I took Christie to one of those “farm to table” restaurants downtown. The restaurant was small and crowded. They don’t take reservations; you have to show up and hope they have a table. The room was dimly lit and Billie Holliday could be heard in the background singing “Strange Fruit.” The waitress took our drink orders. There was an appetizer on the menu called, poutine: French fries covered with gravy and cheese curds, topped with a poached egg.

“That sounds awesome,” I said to Christie. “That could be my dinner.”

“It sounds fattening.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll work it off later.” I reached under the table and squeezed her thigh.

“Hey, whatever happened to that short story you were going to write me?”

“I finished it. I started a new story this morning—a paranormal romance about a woman who falls in love with a ghost named Frank Sinatra. I think I’m gonna get the bison hash. When was the last time you had bison?”

“I’ve never had it.”

“Seriously? You live in Montana and you’ve never had bison?”

“Nope.”

“Then you get the bison and I’ll get the ribeye.”

“Okay.”

Our plan for after dinner was to snuggle on the couch and watch Netflix. We couldn’t find anything we both wanted to watch. Christie had seen everything. While I was flipping through options, Christie found the short story I had written and began reading. I settled on *Scarface*, even though I’ve seen it a half dozen times. Christie read one or two pages and turned to face me. “What is this?” She said. “Why are you writing about my brother?”

“I dunno. Why not?”



“My brother isn’t gay.”

I almost started laughing. Without any thought I said, “Does his boyfriend know that?”

Christie narrowed her eyes. “You didn’t even change his name? Everyone is going to know who you’re talking about.”

“I meant to change his name but I...I got lazy. Don’t worry, no one is going to read it.” I could tell she was upset. It almost looked like she was going to cry. “I wasn’t making fun of him.” Christie read out loud, the part I wrote about his purple pants. I said, “He was wearing purple pants. So what? Who cares? The story is about us, not Mark.” Christie continued reading out loud. She didn’t like what I said about Randal. She hated the story. I apologetically told her it was true, Randall was shady. She said, “Mark and Randal are just friends.”

“Okay, fine. You don’t care that the narrator is having sex with Natalie, but you’re upset because I mentioned your fictional brother is gay?”

“He’s not gay!”

“Okay, fine.” I backed off. I waited a second or two. “Hypothetically, if he was gay, would that bother you?”

“And you didn’t even change his name.” She threw the story on the floor and sat there sulking.

“I’m sorry.” I sat a little closer and put my arm around her. “I didn’t realize this would upset you.”

“Well, it does upset me.”

“Don’t worry. No one is going to see it. I mean... there’s a one in a million chance it gets published in some obscure literary magazine—”

Christie’s facial expression was a mix of shock and anger, like a woman sliding into a bathtub while hugging a toaster. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Babe, it’s highly unlikely. Besides, no one reads literary magazines.”

“Why would you do that!”

“I had to send it out, everyone on Zoetrope seemed to like it.”

Christie grabbed her keys and her purse. I knew it was goodbye forever long before I heard the door slam.